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Dalenberg, Wieke G.; Timmerman, Margaretha C.; Kunnen, E. Saskia; Van Geert, Paul L. C.

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Young people's everyday romance and sexual experiences in relation to sex-related conversations with parents: a diary study in the Netherlands

Wieke G. Dalenberg^a, Margaretha C. Timmerman^a, E. Saskia Kunnen^b and Paul L. C. Van Geert^b

^aDepartment of Education, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands; ^bDepartment of Developmental Psychology, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This study builds on existing research into how young people's emergent sexual development is connected to parent–child sex-related communication through avoidance vs. disclosure. Over the course of one year, a total of 21 young people (age range 12–17.5) reported in longitudinal qualitative diaries their (1) everyday sexual experiences and (2) sex-related conversations with their parents. Using a mixed-methods approach, findings show that less sexually experienced participants reported greater avoidance of parent–child sex-related conversations than more experienced participants. The sex-related conversations of more experienced participants mainly concerned overt experiences in the form of everyday issues with their romantic partner, while the conversations of less experienced participants were characterised by more covert experiences such as opinions about romantic relationships in general. These results suggest that the degree to which young people feel comfortable talking about sexuality with their parents partly depends on when the conversation takes place during a young person's romantic and sexual development.

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Introduction

It is generally acknowledged in the Netherlands and other countries that experimentation with romance and sexuality is part of young people's lives (Tolman and McClelland 2011; Vasilenko, Lefkowitz, and Welsh 2014). As the development of romance and sexuality begins to emerge, young people need to develop skills for dealing with new challenges and social interactions. To handle these relatively new situations, young people may talk to their parents for support and guidance (Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006; Collins, Welsh, and Furman 2009), with family-based sexuality education providing an important means through which young people obtain information about sex-related issues (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education 2015).

However, sexuality is a personal and sensitive topic to talk about, for both parents and for young people. For example, a large-scale survey of 2808 Dutch high school students concluded that only 33% of students who had been the victims of unwanted sexual experiences talked about these experiences with their parents (Timmerman 2004). Avoidance of conversation is a typical characteristic of sex-related discussions (Afifi, Joseph, and Aldeis 2008; Widman et al. 2014).

There is a widespread belief that Dutch society is more open to the discussion of sex and sexuality than other countries such as the USA and the UK (Braeken 1994; Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005; Schalet 2011). Schalet's comparative study showed that, in contrast to US families, most Dutch parents accept the idea of sexual experience between young people when they are in steady relationships and use contraception (Schalet 2011). The same study also showed that Dutch parents think it is important to talk about sexuality with their children, whereas US parents prefer to avoid these sensitive conversations.

Despite these interesting insights, we know little about how young Dutch people's conversations with their parents take place in real life. This study therefore sought to elaborate on current knowledge of young people's willingness to talk about sexual issues in everyday conversations with their parents. Using diary method, we explored whether and how talking about sexuality with parents is related to young people's romantic and sexual lives.

Young people's sexual development

There is considerable variability in when young people first engage in romantic or sexual activity. For example, although the average age in the Netherlands of first sexual intercourse is 16.6 years, half of 16–17-year olds have never had sexual intercourse (de Graaf et al. 2012). Despite these individual differences, young people aged 12–18 are increasingly engaging in romantic and sexual activities. In the Netherlands, the majority of 18–20-year olds report having had at least one romantic relationship (87%) and having engaged in sexual intercourse (77%) (de Graaf et al. 2012).

Most studies of young people's sexual development share a focus on a limited definition of sexuality, primarily including intercourse-related behaviour and negative health outcomes (such as the consequences of no condom use). Unlike these previous studies, this study used a more complex definition of sexuality, one which included implicit representations, such as thoughts, fantasies, desires and beliefs, as well as romantic and intimate topics without any explicit sexual goal (WHO 2012). The focus of our study was on young people's personal perceptions of sexuality and how young people experience sexuality in everyday life. We thus also included those young people who had fantasies outside of a manifest romantic or sexual interaction.

Theories of romantic and sexual development include young people without manifest experiences. Three stages can be roughly distinguished: an initial stage of romantic fantasies, a middle stage of short-term dating and a final stage of consolidation into a dyadic romantic bond (Connolly and McIsaac 2011). Young people develop their romantic experiences from an internal orientation towards romantic and sexual affiliations (i.e. the initial stage), through diverse romantic and sexual interactions (i.e. the middle stage), into more manifest dyadic romantic bonds (i.e. the final stage). The romantic bond can subsequently be dissolved and young people will then find other romantic partners through further romantic and sexual

affiliations and interactions and so on. The development of romance and sexuality is an ongoing process, which changes over the course of a (young) person's life.

Conversations with parents and young people's sexual development

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between parent–child sex-related conversations and sexual outcomes for young people. Literature reviews have shown that parent–child conversations about sex or contraception are associated with a rising age of first sexual intercourse and greater condom use (Commendador 2010; Markham et al. 2010). A recent Dutch longitudinal study among 12–18-year olds showed that sex-related conversations with parents are negatively related to peer pressure to have sex (Van De Bongardt et al. 2014). Other studies have shown no association between parent–child communication and sexual behaviour in samples of 11–17-year-old Latin Americans, 14–15-year-old European Americans and 16–19-year-old Australians (Troth and Peterson 2000; McNeely et al. 2002; Guzmán et al. 2003; Wight, Williamson, and Henderson 2006), and a few studies which used a national representative sample of young people in the Netherlands and the USA reported that parent–child conversations about sex, protection and contraception are related to higher levels of sexual activity among young people (Deptula, Henry, and Schoeny 2010; De Looze et al. 2014). Results on how parental sex-related communication is related to young people's sexuality have therefore been inconsistent (see also Jaccard, Dodge, and Dittus 2002; Dilorio, Pluhar, and Belcher 2003).

Longitudinal studies suggests that openness in parent–child sex-related conversations increases as young adults (18–25-year-old European Americans) grow older (Lefkowitz 2005; Morgan, Thorne, and Zurbriggen 2010). This association may reflect an increased willingness or need to discuss sexual topics with parents when young people have greater experience with sexuality (Eisenberg et al. 2006; Morgan, Thorne, and Zurbriggen 2010). In fact, parents are inclined to adapt their communication to the personal experiences of their children. Parents who believed that their children were dating or were sexually active talked more about sex with their children among the samples of North American parents of 12–16-year olds and 13–17-year olds, and Latina/Hispanic American 20–45-year-old women being interviewed about their youth (Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, and Flood 1998; Eisenberg et al. 2006; Beckett et al. 2010). Research has shown that North American mothers of 14–17-year olds were prone to disclose information about condoms when they thought that their children's friends were sexually active (Miller and Whitaker 2001).

The current study

As mentioned above, previous studies have in common the fact that they focus on a limited definition of sexuality, primarily including explicit sexual behaviour and negative health outcomes. Furthermore, longitudinal studies addressing the relationship between young people's various sexual experiences and parent–child sex-related communication are scarce. To explore the relationship between parent–child conversations about sexuality and young people's emergent sexual experiences, we used a longitudinal qualitative diary study.

We believe that a diary method is most suitable for capturing real-life implicit and manifest sexual experiences in young people. Emergent sexual experiences may be difficult to measure using traditional survey methods because of the covert nature of many experiences (e.g.

in the form of desires and wishes). In addition to manifest romantic relationships, other forms of sexual experience (e.g. thinking about someone special) are also part of emergent sexual development. Another reason for using diary reports to study young people's romantic and sexual experiences is that diaries measure events and feelings on the spot. Consequently, recall error is less of a problem (Nezlek 2011). Finally, asking participants to report on conversations over the previous week, on a regular basis and over a long period increases the chance that most real-life experiences and conversations will be captured.

This study represents a first exploratory step towards examining how young people's stage of romantic development is related to openness to talking about sex-related experiences with parents over the course of one year. We studied young people's emergent sexual experiences, broadly defined, from young people's own perspectives, with a focus on personal sexual experiences and everyday sex-related conversations with parents.

Method

Participants

Data for this study were collected as part of the larger STARS (Studies on Trajectories of Adolescent Relationships and Sexuality) project, a longitudinal research study of romantic and sexual development among young people in the Netherlands. The initial sample of participants consisted of 66 participants who had parental consent and volunteered to participate (48 girls, 18 boys; $M_{age} = 15.3$; $range = 12-17.5$). In the analysis reported here, we drew on a subsample of 21 young people (19 girls; 2 boys) who reported personal sexual experience *and* at least one sex-related conversation with their parents in their diaries over a period of one year.

At the start of the study, the 21 participants averaged 15.5 years of age ($range = 13-17.3$). Fourteen per cent of the participants were enrolled in pre-vocational secondary education, 29% in senior general secondary education and 57% in pre-university education. All the participants had been born in the Netherlands and reported their sexual orientation as (predominantly) heterosexual. Overall, the participant characteristics of the research sample ($n = 21$) did not differ with regard to age from the initial sample ($n = 66$) ($t(8)=0.791$, $p = 0.432$). However, more girls in the research sample ($n = 21$) reported sex-related conversations compared to the initial sample ($n = 66$) ($\chi^2(1, N = 66)=4.892$, $p = 0.027$).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from secondary schools in large cities and small municipalities in the northern part of the Netherlands. Participation was voluntary and selection criterion was being a high school student aged between 12 and 18 years (e.g. de Graaf et al. 2012). Six high schools known to the first author (via acquaintances and colleagues) were approached by email and telephone and through school visits. The schools were representative for the three main types of high schools in the Netherlands. In addition to being provided with written and oral information about the research project, motivated young people were invited to volunteer to participate in the study and were asked to return a registration form. Motivation was deemed important since the study design was time-consuming and

intensive, involving the production of regular reports over one year. Only participants with written permission from their parents/guardians were allowed to participate in the study.

To collect information on everyday sexual experiences and parent–child conversations about sexuality over the course of one year, participants were asked to complete a total of 18 diaries divided over 3 waves (i.e. W1, W2 and W3) of data collection periods of six weeks, each separated by a two-month break. Each diary consisted of two parts: ‘Personal sexual experiences’ and ‘Everyday sex-related conversations with parents’. We utilised three separate data collection periods because we did not want to overburden the participants. Participants were asked to enter their answers to questions in an online weblog diary via a secure survey website. Email addresses and usernames were collected separately to guarantee anonymity. Participants who forgot to complete a diary (e.g. in the second week) were given the opportunity to complete the diary in an additional week (i.e. the seventh week).

Participants were allowed to ask questions and request advice or help after each diary entry. This support was provided in close collaboration with a mental health institute so that E-health or referral to a support service could be offered if required. The few participants who asked questions were not included in our study’s 21-member sample. To increase participant motivation, the researcher (WGD) remained in contact with the participants by email. She sent out newsletters, end of year wishes and personally answered incoming emails. After each data collection period, participants were rewarded for their participation with increasing sums of money (EUR 5 at W1; EUR 7.50 at W2; EUR 10 at W3). Prior to data collection, the study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Psychology of the University of Groningen.

Semi-structured diaries

Because of the innovative nature of the diary study, a pilot study was conducted using a sample of 183 young people at a pre-vocational secondary school who had completed the diary once without any financial compensation for their participation. The results showed that participants understood the questions and were motivated to report private personal experiences. Minimal revisions were made to the wording of the questions used in this earlier study.

Data collection started with a short questionnaire to collect demographic information, such as age, gender and education. The diary consisted of two parts. In the first part of the questionnaire, which focused on ‘Personal sexual experiences’, participants were invited to write about a recent personal sexual experience as follows:

The following questions are about what was most on your mind in the previous week regarding falling in love, flirting, going out, having sex, intimacy, having a romantic relationship and/or everything related to that. Thus, write about something that is on your mind, that you are thinking about, which evokes strong feelings for you.

Participants were provided with open-ended prompts to describe their sexual experience. The relevant measures here were the sex-related topic and what the participant desired and did during the event, or wished for and wanted to do in the case of an internal experience, such as a thought or wish.

Likewise, participants were asked to describe conversations with their parents about their sexual experiences in the second part of the diary entitled ‘Everyday sex-related conversations with parents’. Participants were given open-ended prompts to describe their conversation. The relevant measures here were the conversation topic and what the participant desired and did during the conversation.

Table 1. Codes for ‘personal sexual experiences’: romantic developmental stages ($\kappa = 0.9$).

Coding category	Explanation	Narrative example
Initial romantic developmental stage	Diary reports reflecting romantic affiliations without explicit contact with a significant other	‘I think I am in love! Though, we never talked with each other... (sadly!)’
Middle romantic developmental stage	Diary reports reflecting romantic affiliations with explicit contact with a significant other	‘I met a boy who I really like and he wanted to kiss me, but in the end we didn’t’
Final romantic developmental stage	Diary reports reflecting experiences within a romantic relationship	‘I met up with my boyfriend today, but I do not know whether I still like him’

Notes: κ = inter-rater reliability measured by Cohen’s κ .

Data analysis

Quantitative analyses were performed using *t*-tests and chi-square analyses to test differences between subsamples. Constant comparative method (CCM) was used to code and analyse the diary descriptions of specific topics and their emerging dimensions (Boeije 2010). It was applied independently to the two diary parts and involved three steps: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The first step involved selecting a small part of the whole sample for open coding, which resulted in the development of tentative codes for every diary report. The second step – ‘axial coding’ – involved applying these tentative codes to the rest of the sample. The third step – ‘selective coding’ – involved structuring the data by focusing back on the study aims. We identified the importance of themes by calculating the frequency of the codes, resulting in a number of core categories. These core categories will be explained separately for the two parts of the diary study.

Personal sexual experiences

Every diary entry about sexuality, broadly defined, was coded as Sexuality (WHO 2012). All reports that could not be coded as Sexuality were coded Other (e.g. accounts of peers or school). Inspired by romantic developmental stage theories, each diary report on Sexuality was coded as an experience in one of the three romantic developmental stages, that is (1) initial stage, (2) middle stage and (3) final stage (Connolly and McIsaac 2011; see Table 1 for explanation and narrative examples). Because each participant made diary entries several times during the year, each experience (i.e. diary report) was therefore classified into one of the aforementioned romantic developmental stages. Using the information from the several diary reports, each participant was identified as belonging to a specific romantic developmental stage.

Everyday sex-related conversations with parents

Each diary report of a conversation represents how a participant experienced a conversation. As with personal sexual experiences, all the parent–child conversations were coded as Sexuality or Other (e.g. conversations about school).

Sex-related conversations were the focus of analysis. Each was coded as avoidance or disclosure (see Table 2 for coding categories, explanation and narrative examples). Avoidance

Table 2. Codes for ‘everyday sex-related conversations with parents’: avoidance or disclosure ($\kappa = 0.88$).

Coding category	Explanation	Narrative example
Avoidance	Participants showed a reluctance to talk to their parents about sexuality	‘I tried to end the conversation. I did not want to talk about it’
Disclosure	Participants were willing to talk to their parents about sexuality	‘I just talked to my mother about it’

Notes: κ = inter-rater reliability measured by Cohen’s κ .

covered diary reports describing participants trying to avoid conversation and feeling reluctant to talk to their parents. Disclosure covered participants describing talking to their parents within a conversation. Since every participant made several diary entries during the year, each participant described several sex-related conversations. Every participant was ultimately classified by the number of avoidance or disclosure conversations reported during one year.

The validity of the mixed-method approach was assessed by discussion between the first author and several (under)graduate students concerning whether the coding terms reflected the contents. Diary reports were coded both by one of the authors and a trained undergraduate student. Inter-observer reliability was calculated using Cohen’s κ . The codes for the first and second parts were considered reliable with $\kappa = 0.9$ for romantic developmental stages and $\kappa = 0.89$ and $\kappa = 0.88$ for conversation topic and avoidance or disclosure, respectively.

Sexual experiences and sex-related conversations with parents

To examine the relationship between sexual experiences and parent–child conversations about sexuality, we developed a typology denoting the combination of romantic developmental stage and the openness of sex-related conversations (i.e. disclosure vs. avoidance) for each participant. Quotations from individual participants are denoted by numbers, from P01 to P21.

Findings

Personal sexual experiences

In the first part of the diary, participants wrote about their everyday sexual experiences. All 21 participants wrote at least once about a personal sexual experience during the research period. Although we explicitly asked participants to write about the sex-related topic that was most on their minds, some also wrote about other topics (e.g. their peers). Personal sexual experiences were reported in 59% of all the diary reports.

Parent–child sex-related conversations

In the second part of the diary, the 21 participants reported on the topics they talked about with their parents. In addition to sex-related conversations, participants also wrote about other conversation topics with their parents (e.g. school). A total of 30% of the conversations which these participants ($n = 21$) reported were about a sex-related topic.

Table 3. Typology of romantic developmental stage (from ‘personal sexual experiences’) and disclosure/avoidance (from ‘everyday sex-related conversations with parents’).

Typology	<i>n</i>	Percentage (%)
Experienced-Disclosure	12	57
Inexperienced-Avoidance	7	33
In/Experienced-Avoidance/Disclosure	2	10
Total	21	100

Notes: Inexperienced = low romantic developmental stage. Experienced = high romantic developmental stage.

Sexual experiences and sex-related conversations: a typology

We now turn to the central part of the study, which relates young people’s personal experiences to everyday sex-related conversations using the subsample of 21 participants who reported at least one conversation about sexuality over the course of one year. In the first part of the diary ‘Personal sexual experiences’, participants also wrote about topics (such as school or peers) other than sexuality. The general number of diary reports (including the other topics) did not differ between the subsample of 21 participants and those who did not report a sex-related conversation ($M = 13.1$, $SD = 2.9$ vs. $M = 13.7$, $SD = 3.4$; $t(64) = -0.728$, $p = 0.112$). However, the subsample did report significantly more personal sexual experiences than the participants who did not report a parent–child sex-related conversation ($M = 8$, $SD = 3.5$ vs. $M = 3$, $SD = 3.5$, respectively; $t(64) = -4.429$; $p = 0.001$).

The 21 participants’ personal sexual experiences were used to allocate each participant to a romantic developmental stage. This classification resulted in participants who reported (1) both initial and middle stage experiences; (2) only middle stage experiences; (3) both middle and final stage experiences; and (4) both final and initial stage experiences.

In addition, participants’ reports of sex-related conversations were divided into avoidance or disclosure, which resulted in three groups: (1) disclosure, (2) avoidance and (3) a mix of avoidance and disclosure in the course of one year.

Combining the two categorisations, the 21 participants were classified into three combinations or types: Experienced-Disclosure, Inexperienced-Avoidance and In/Experienced-Disclosure/Avoidance (see Table 3). Experienced and Inexperienced here refer to higher and lower romantic developmental stages, respectively.

Experienced-Disclosure

Most of the participants were categorised as Experienced-Disclosure ($n = 12$). The age range in this group was 14–17 years old. One participant was aged 14, eight participants were aged 15–16 and three participants were aged 17. Experienced means that the participants’ everyday sexual experiences were coded at relatively higher romantic developmental stages. Except for one participant, all the participants could be coded as at least a middle romantic stage (stage 2). Furthermore, almost everyone had experiences from the final romantic stage (stage 3), meaning that participants were reporting everyday sexual experiences with their romantic partners. For example, the diary reports of a 15-year-old girl were coded as an experience in the final romantic stage because she mentioned the following feelings about her romantic partner (P07):

[What was it exactly about?] ‘I do not know whether or not I still love my boyfriend because my feelings for him are diminishing and I do not know how to cope with this. (...) I am afraid I will regret breaking up.’

Another 15-year-old girl in the Experience-Disclosure group wrote of experiences which could be classified in middle and final stages of romantic development.

First, an example of a middle stage report (P03):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I was previously rejected by a boy and he is still on my mind. But I have met another boy. However, he rejected me too. And now the first boy is single again and we are in touch.'

Later on, the same 15-year-old girl mentioned getting involved in a romantic relationship and this report was coded as a final stage of romantic development (P03):

[What was it exactly about?] 'Well, we went steady. We started a relationship. (...) I hung out with him and just clung onto him.'

With respect to sex-related conversations, participants in the Experienced-Disclosure Group consistently disclosed information to their parents ('Everyday sex-related conversations'). A characteristic of sex-related conversations within this group was that the specific topics of conversation referred to overt experience of sexuality, such as meeting a romantic partner. For example, a 15-year-old girl reported (P07):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'My parents are going away for the weekend, and I will have to sleep over somewhere else. "I'll ask a friend", I said. My father answered with: "You can also go to your boyfriend's." The conversation that followed was about being allowed to sleep over at my boyfriend's house. I wanted it to be Friday already! And I accepted their suggestion.'

The conversation could also be about an evaluation of an actual experience, as opposed to thoughts or opinions regarding a romantic partner. Another 15-year-old girl reported (P03):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'We talked about that that boy is an asshole and it would be better for me to break up with him. (...) I wished everything to be okay and I cried with my dad.'

Inexperienced-Avoidance

The conversation patterns of seven participants were classified as Inexperienced-Avoidance. The age range in this group was 13–17 years old. Two participants were aged 13–14, three participants were aged 15–16 and two participants were aged 17. The term Inexperienced here refers to participants who reported sexual experiences about the initial (Stage 1) and middle romantic stages (Stage 2). No participant referred to having a steady romantic relationship (i.e. final romantic stage, Stage 3). For example, a 16-year-old girl reported an experience at the initial stage of romantic development (P11):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I was thinking about a boy who I like a lot. I want to contact him. I think that if I bump into him, I will start a conversation with him.'

In another diary report, the same girl (P11) continued to describe experiences at the first stage of romantic development. The following example shows that after a few weeks, she still liked the same boy (P11):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I was thinking about that boy again. I really like him. I was thinking about what he looks like and what he does. (...) I think I will try to talk to him if I bump into him.'

Another example of an experience coded to the initial development stage comes from another girl. A 16-year-old girl reported that she had feelings for a classmate (P16):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I really like this nice classmate (a lot of people like him). But I am too insecure to think he would like me. I wish that I was not so insecure and that everything would go the way I want it to go.'

With respect to sex-related conversations, these participants experienced talking about sexuality with their parents in terms of avoidance. They did not want to talk about sexuality.

By focusing on sex-related conversations, it appeared that participants in the Inexperienced-Avoidance Group reported briefly on *covert experiences*. The topics were described in general terms. One 16-year-old girl reported a parent-child conversation about a *covert* experience which she avoided by saying nothing (P11):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'About whether I like somebody and what I think about romantic relationships. (...) For us to talk about another topic: I didn't want to talk about it. I said nothing.'

Another example came from another 16-year-old girl (P16):

[What was it exactly about?] 'Whether I liked/like somebody. Actually, I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't answer the questions.'

In these examples, it seems that the parent wanted to know whether their daughter liked somebody and what their daughter's thoughts were about romantic relationships in general. The parent did not refer to any event in real life as a starting point for discussing these topics.

In/Experienced-Disclosure/Avoidance

The sexual experiences of two participants could be coded high and low on the romantic developmental stages and were referred to as 'In/Experienced'. The girls in this group were 15 years old. At the beginning of the research period, both participants reported experience within a romantic relationship. However, during the course of the research they broke up with their romantic partner. Afterwards, they reported new romantic experiences bringing them back into the lower romantic developmental stage. One example of an experience of breaking up comes from a 15-year-old girl (P04):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I ended the romantic relationship with my boyfriend, but now I have doubts about whether I want him back or not. (...) I am going to think about what I want and I will try distance myself from my ex-boyfriend.'

During the course of the study, the same 15-year-old girl (P04) reported in her diary about liking a new person. This report was coded as an initial romantic stage experience (P04):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I thought a boy was interesting. But now I hear that he likes another girl. It confuses me.'

Participants in the In/Experienced-Disclosure/Avoidance Group also reported conversations with their parents, which shifted from disclosure (when they were at the high romantic developmental stage) to avoidance (when they were at the low romantic developmental stage). The participants disclosed information about overt experiences of breaking up with their boyfriend, yet they avoided talking about the more covert experiences of being in love. The 15-year-old girl above who broke up with her boyfriend disclosed this experience to her mother (P04):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'I told my mother that I'd broken up with my boyfriend and why I broke up. I wished she'd already known so that I wouldn't have to tell her. But I just told her the whole story.'

Another conversation reported by this same 15-year-old girl concerned a *covert* topic, which the girl tried to avoid (P04):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'My parents were checking whether I liked somebody or not. (...) I laughed a little bit and hoped the conversation would be over soon.'

The other 15-year-old girl in the In/Experienced-Disclosure/Avoidance Group who broke up with her boyfriend first talked with her mother about (overt topic) how to end the romantic relationship (P06):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'We talked about how I could break up with my boyfriend. What I could say and how I could say it. (...) We talked about how to handle this situation well and what I should do. I think it is devastating to hurt someone so much, just because I do not want to be unhappy myself.'

After a while, the same 15-year-old girl (P06) fell in love with someone else, but she did not want to talk about this covert topic with her parents (P06):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'My parents know, embarrassingly enough, that I like someone because I blushed when my sister talked about him. (...) Well, I love to talk about him all day, only not with my parents. I do not want them to know. I tried to ignore the conversation.'

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to focus systematically on the everyday lives of young people using a diary method and relating young Dutch people's everyday sexual experiences to openness in parent–child sex-related conversations over a period of one year. Overall, the results indicate that young people's ease in discussing sexuality with their parents is associated with their stage of romantic and sexual development. Three groups of participants could be identified: young people in the early stages of romantic and sexual development, who tended to avoid sexuality-related conversations with their parents; more experienced young people (i.e. those at higher romantic developmental stages) who disclosed sex-related conversations with their parents; and a mixed group.

This study adds to the explicit sex-related focus of earlier research showing that young people's real-life romance and sexuality experiences, including internal and romantic aspects of sexuality, are associated with different kinds of parent–child sex-related conversations. Findings echo earlier questionnaire research which found that parents generally tend to adapt intercourse-related topics of communication to the personal experiences of their children (Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, and Flood 1998; Miller and Whitaker 2001; Beckett et al. 2010). Variability in age between less and more experienced young people underlines the importance of stage-appropriateness (alongside age-appropriateness) in informal and formal sexual education efforts. For example, our study findings suggest that some young people need guidance in handling 'adult-like' romantic relationship issues (e.g. breaking up) at a relatively young age. Young people differ in the type and number of their sexual experiences and consequently the guidance they need.

Participant groups not only differed with respect to their romantic and sexuality stage, but also with respect to the sex-related topics they communicated with their parents. More experienced young people reported mainly discussing overt or actual experiences such as meeting a romantic partner. In contrast, less experienced young people mainly reported discussing less explicit experiences such as thoughts and opinions about having a crush on somebody. Our study suggests that young people see their initial sexual experiences as private: no one is entitled to know what is going on in their minds. These findings reinforce those from recent questionnaire research which found that young people were more prone to disclose overt experiences, for example, daily issues arising with their romantic partner, than covert experiences, such as having a crush (Daddis and Randolph 2010).

Given the place of sexuality in young people's diary reports, our results suggest that sexuality is not the most important topic but merely one of many that young people are concerned about. In this study, young people who reported at least one sex-related conversation provided more reports of personal sexual experiences than participants who never reported a sex-related conversation. The results suggest that sexuality plays a more significant role in the lives of young people who talk more with their parents about sex-related topics. These young people may feel a greater need to discuss sex-related topics with their parents, or their parents may be more aware of young people's concerns about sexuality. Consequently, the initiation of an everyday conversation about sexuality is more likely to occur. Informing parents about the course of young people's romantic and sexual development could be suitable a first step improving family-based sex education.

Although Dutch society is well known for its relatively open sexual culture (Schalet 2011), only one-third ($n = 21$) of our total sample ($n = 66$) reported an everyday sex-related conversation with their parent(s). Furthermore, the focus on conversations about romantic topics seems to confirm findings from previous Dutch questionnaire studies that the romantic aspects of sexuality are more regularly discussed with parents than explicit sexual topics (e.g. condom use) (de Graaf et al. 2012; De Looze et al. 2014). Encouraging parents to talk about romantic issues (in addition to explicit sexual topics) with their children could be an important second step in family-based sex education.

The small number of conversations about sexuality with parents may also underline the importance of formal sex education more generally. Although parents are important sources of information and advice for young people, children may not be keen on talking with their parents about a private topic such as sexuality. They may instead prefer to talk with those who are slightly more distant about personal matters (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education 2015). Because of this, a legal requirement for schools and other bodies to provide formal sexuality education to young people could be of importance in assisting young people's healthy sexual development.

Limitations, strengths and conclusions

Our findings need to be considered in light of the study's limitations. First, our sample size was small and we only recruited young people from the Northern part of the Netherlands. The sample consisted of young people predominantly identified as native-Dutch, girls and heterosexual. The results may therefore not be representative for all young Dutch people, and the study should be seen as an exploratory investigation that lays for the foundations for future replication with a larger sample.

Second, due to the chosen methodology, this study is largely descriptive in nature. Although the study involved relatively short diary reports, the accounts of young people who did report sex-related conversations provide us with insight into how such conversations take place in real life and how they relate to young people's romantic development. The study enabled us to classify participants into different types, which differed with respect to how they experienced conversations with parents.

Third, with respect to other methodologies, combining diaries with interviews might elicit more in-depth accounts. However, sex is first and foremost a private topic, especially for young people. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that many young people are reluctant to answer questions on intimate and sexual matters, particularly in interview situations

where the interviewer is an adult in the form of a parent, teacher or other professional (Timmerman 2009). Using diaries did, however, provide some insight into young people's experiences and perspectives on these sensitive issues.

Fourth, to provide ideas of the kind of topics participants could write about, some topic examples were included along with the open-ended questions. Because of this it is possible that participants were primed to write specifically about the sample topics. The diaries did, however, contain accounts of topics and unique everyday experiences which were both related and unrelated to sexuality, indicating that participants felt able to write about a relatively wide range of recent experiences that were of importance to them at the time.

Fifth, most participants in the larger study reported having had no sex-related conversations with their parents during the research period. We think that these participants were not reluctant to report a sex-related conversation, as they actively volunteered to participate in the study and were quite open in writing about sex-related issues in the other part of the investigation. It is possible that some of these young people may have had conversations about sexuality but not remember them, or they may not have been seen as significant enough to report. As conversations about sexuality do not occur regularly, it is perhaps not surprising that so many participants did not report a conversation with their parents about sexuality.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study may help support the development of future forms of sexuality education by stressing the importance of reflection on experiences of current or future romantic relationships, in addition to narrower concerns including the human body and the biology of safe sex. While increasingly parents are encouraged to talk to their children about sexuality early in life, when they are young and not involved in a romantic relationship (Eisenberg et al. 2006; European Expert Group on Sexuality Education 2015), our study shows that talking about sexuality in the early stages of romantic development can be quite difficult in real life. This is an important finding for efforts to help parents to talk more openly with their children about sexuality.

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